

HERE BIGYNNETH THE TALE OF THE WIFE OF BATH



NOW the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours, and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes,
This maketh that ther been no faieries;
for ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself,
In undermeles and in morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.
Wommen may go saufly up and down;
In every bussh, or under every tree,
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

AND so bifel it, that this kyng Arthour,
Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelour,
That on a day cam ridynge fro ryver;
And happed that, allone as she was born,
He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
Of whiche mayde, anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force he rafte hire maydenhed;
for which oppressioun was swich clamour,
And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour,
That dampned was this knyght for to be deed.

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By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed
Paraventure, swich was the statut tho;
But that the queene and othere ladies mo
So longe preyeden the kyng of grace,
Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,
And yaf hym to the queene al at hir wille,
To chese, whether she wolde hym save or spille.
The queene thanketh the kyng with al hir myght,
And after this thus spak she to the knyght,
Whan that she saugh hir tyme, upon a day:
Thou standest yet, quod she, in swich array,
That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.
I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me
What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren;
Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from iren.
And if thou kanst nat tellen it anon,
Yet shal I yewe thee leve for to gon
A twelfmonth and a day, to seche and leere
An answer suffisant in this mateere;
And suretee wol I han, er that thou pace,
Thy body for to yelden in this place.
This was this knyght, and sorwefully he
Siketh:
But what! he may nat do al as hym liketh;
And at the laste, he chees hym for to wende,
And come agayn, right at the yeres ende,
With swich answer as God wolde hym purveye;
And taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye.
He seket every hous and every place
Wheras he hopeth for to fynde grace
To lerne, what thyng wommen loven moost;
But he ne koude arryven in no coost
Wheras he myghte fynde in this mateere
Two creatures accordynge in feere.
SOMME seyde, wommen loven best
Richesse,
Somme seyde, honour, somme seyde,
Jolynesse,
Somme, riche array, somme seyden, lust abedde,
And ofte tyme to be wydwe and wedde.
Somme seyde, that oure hertes been moost esed
Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed.
He gooth ful ny the sothe, I wol nat lye,
A man shal wynne us best with flaterye;
And with attendance, and with bisynesse,
Been we ylymed, bothe moore and lesse.
AND somme seyn, how that we loven best
For to be free, and do right as us lest,
And that no man repreve us of oure vice,
But seye that we be wise, and nothyng nyce;
for trewely ther is noon of us alle,
If any wight wol clawe us on the galle,
That we nil kike, for he seith us sooth.
Assay, and he shal fynde it, that so dooth,
for, be we never so vicious withinne,
We wol been holden wise, and clene of synne.
AND somme seyn, that greet delit han we
For to been holden stable and eek secrete,
And in o purpos stedefastly to dwelle,
And nat biwreye thyng that men us telle;
But that tale is nat worth a rake/stele.
Pardee, we wommen konne nothyng bele;
Witnessse on Myda; wol ye heere the tale?



VYDE, amonges othere thynges
smale,
Seyde, Myda hadde, under his longe
heres,
Growynge upon his heed, two asses
eres,
The whiche vice he hydde, as he best myghte,
ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,
That, save his wyf, ther wist of it namo.
He loved hire moost, and trusted hire also;
He preyede hire, that to no creature
She sholde tellen of his disfigure.
She swoor him Nay, for al this world to wynne,
She nolde do that vileynye or synne,
To make hir housbonde han so foul a name;
She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.
But nathelees, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;
Hir thoughte it swal so soore aboute hir herte,
That nedely som word hire mooste asterte;
And siith she dorste telle it to no man,
Doun to a mareys faste by she ran;
Til she came there, her herte was afyre,
And as a bitore bombleth in the myre,
She leyde hir mouth unto the water doun:
Biwreye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,
Quod she, to thee I telle it, and namo,
Myn housbonde hath longe asses crys two.
Now is myn herte all hool, now is it oute;
I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute.
HEERE may ye se, though we a tyme abyde,
Yet, out it moot, we can no conseil hyde.
The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,
Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it leere.
THIS knyght, of which my tale is specially,
Whan that he saugh he myghte nat come
therby,
That is to seye, what wommen loven moost,
Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.
But hoom he gooth, he myghte nat sojourne,
The day was come that homward mooste he tourne.
And in his wey it happed hym to ryde,
In al this care, under a forest/syde,
Wheras he saugh upon a daunce go
Of ladies foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne;
But certainly, er he came fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf;
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.
Agayn the knyght this olde wyf gan ryse,
And seyde: Sire knyght, heerforth ne lith no wey;
Tel me, what that ye seken, by youre fey.
Paraventure it may the bettre be;
Thise olde folk kan muchel thyng, quod she,
My leewe mooder, quod this knyght, certeyn
I nam but deed, but if that I kan seyn
What thyng it is that wommen moost desire:
Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire.
O plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand,
quod she,

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